THE WIDOW IN THE BYE STREET

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Cover

THE WIDOW IN THE BYE STREET

BY

JOHN MASEFIELD

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Second Thousand

TO

MY WIFE

I

Down Bye Street, in a little Shropshire town,
There lived a widow with her only son:
She had no wealth nor title to renown,
Nor any joyous hours, never one.
She rose from ragged mattress before sun
And stitched all day until her eyes were red,
And had to stitch, because her man was dead.

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Sometimes she fell asleep, she stitched so hard,
Letting the linen fall upon the floor;
And hungry cats would steal in from the yard,
And mangy chickens pecked about the door
Craning their necks so ragged and so sore
To search the room for bread-crumbs, or for mouse,
But they got nothing in the widow's house.

Mostly she made her bread by hemming shrouds
For one rich undertaker in the High Street,
Who used to pray that folks might die in crowds
And that their friends might pay to let them lie sweet;
And when one died the widow in the Bye Street
Stitched night and day to give the worm his dole.
The dead were better dressed than that poor soul.

Her little son was all her life's delight,
For in his little features she could find
A glimpse of that dead husband out of sight,
Where out of sight is never out of mind.
And so she stitched till she was nearly blind,
Or till the tallow candle end was done,
To get a living for her little son.

Her love for him being such she would not rest,
It was a want which ate her out and in,
Another hunger in her withered breast
Pressing her woman's bones against the skin.
To make him plump she starved her body thin.
And he, he ate the food, and never knew,
He laughed and played as little children do.

When there was little sickness in the place
She took what God would send, and what God sent
Never brought any colour to her face
Nor life into her footsteps when she went
Going, she trembled always withered and bent
For all went to her son, always the same,
He was first served whatever blessing came.

Sometimes she wandered out to gather sticks,
For it was bitter cold there when it snowed.
And she stole hay out of the farmer's ricks
For bands to wrap her feet in while she sewed,
And when her feet were warm and the grate glowed
She hugged her little son, her heart's desire,
With 'Jimmy, ain't it snug beside the fire?'

So years went on till Jimmy was a lad
And went to work as poor lads have to do,
And then the widow's loving heart was glad
To know that all the pains she had gone through
And all the years of putting on the screw,
Down to the sharpest turn a mortal can,
Had borne their fruit, and made her child a man.

He got a job at working on the line
Tipping the earth down, trolly after truck,
From daylight till the evening, wet or fine,
With arms all red from wallowing in the muck,
And spitting, as the trolly tipped, for luck,
And singing 'Binger' as he swung the pick
Because the red blood ran in him so quick.

So there was bacon then, at night, for supper
In Bye Street there, where he and mother stay;
And boots they had, not leaky in the upper,
And room rent ready on the settling day;
And beer for poor old mother, worn and grey,
And fire in frost; and in the widow's eyes
It seemed the Lord had made earth paradise.

And there they sat of evenings after dark
Singing their song of 'Binger,' he and she,
Her poor old cackle made the mongrels bark
And 'You sing Binger, mother,' carols he;
'By crimes, but that's a good song, that her be':
And then they slept there in the room they shared,
And all the time fate had his end prepared.

One thing alone made life not perfect sweet:
The mother's daily fear of what would come
When woman and her lovely boy should meet,
When the new wife would break up the old home.
Fear of that unborn evil struck her dumb,
And when her darling and a woman met,
She shook and prayed, 'Not her, O God; not yet.'

'Not yet, dear God, my Jimmy go from me.'
Then she would subtly question with her son.
'Not very handsome, I don't think her be?'
'God help the man who marries such an one.'
Her red eyes peered to spy the mischief done.
She took great care to keep the girls away,
And all her trouble made him easier prey.

There was a woman out at Plaister's End,
Light of her body, fifty to the pound,
A copper coin for any man to spend,
Lovely to look on when the wits were drowned.
Her husband's skeleton was never found,
It lay among the rocks at Glydyr Mor
Where he drank poison finding her a whore.

She was not native there, for she belonged
Out Milford way, or Swansea; no one knew.
She had the piteous look of someone wronged,
'Anna,' her name, a widow, last of Triw.
She had lived at Plaister's End a year or two;
At Callow's cottage, renting half an acre;
She was a hen-wife and a perfume-maker.

Secret she was; she lived in reputation;
But secret unseen threads went floating out:
Her smile, her voice, her face, were all temptation,
All subtle flies to trouble man the trout;
Man to entice, entrap, entangle, flout…
To take and spoil, and then to cast aside:
Gain without giving was the craft she plied.

And she complained, poor lonely widowed soul,
How no one cared, and men were rutters all;
While true love is an ever-burning goal
Burning the brighter as the shadows fall.
And all love's dogs went hunting at the call,
Married or not she took them by the brain,
Sucked at their hearts and tossed them back again.

Like the straw fires lit on Saint John's Eve,
She burned and dwindled in her fickle heart;
For if she wept when Harry took his leave,
Her tears were lures to beckon Bob to start.
And if, while loving Bob, a tinker's cart
Came by, she opened window with a smile
And gave the tinker hints to wait a while.

She passed for pure; but, years before, in Wales,
Living at Mountain Ash with different men,
Her less discretion had inspired tales
Of certain things she did, and how, and when.
Those seven years of youth; we are frantic then.
She had been frantic in her years of youth,
The tales were not more evil than the truth.

She had two children as the fruits of trade
Though she drank bitter herbs to kill the curse,
Both of them sons, and one she overlaid,
The other one the parish had to nurse.
Now she grew plump with money in her purse,
Passing for pure a hundred miles, I guess,
From where her little son wore workhouse dress.

There with the Union boys he came and went,
A parish bastard fed on bread and tea,
Wearing a bright tin badge in furthest Gwent,
And no one knowing who his folk could be.
His mother never knew his new name: she,--
She touched the lust of those who served her turn,
And chief among her men was Shepherd Ern.

A moody, treacherous man of bawdy mind,
Married to that mild girl from Ercall Hill,
Whose gentle goodness made him more inclined
To hotter sauces sharper on the bill.
The new lust gives the lecher the new thrill,
The new wine scratches as it slips the throat,
The new flag is so bright by the old boat.

Ern was her man to buy her bread and meat,
Half of his weekly wage was hers to spend,
She used to mock 'How is your wife, my sweet?'
Or wail, 'O, Ernie, how is this to end?'
Or coo, 'My Ernie is without a friend,
She cannot understand my precious life,'
And Ernie would go home and beat his wife.

So the four souls are ranged, the chess-board set,
The dark, invisible hand of secret Fate
Brought it to come to being that they met
After so many years of lying in wait.
While we least think it he prepares his Mate.
Mate, and the King's pawn played, it never ceases
Though all the earth is dust of taken pieces.

II

October Fair-time is the time for fun,
For all the street is hurdled into rows
Of pens of heifers blinking at the sun,
And Lemster sheep which pant and seem to doze,
And stalls of hardbake and galanty shows,
And cheapjacks smashing crocks, and trumpets blowing,
And the loud organ of the horses going.

There you can buy blue ribbons for your girl

Or take her in a swing-boat tossing high,
Or hold her fast when all the horses whirl
Round to the steam pipe whanging at the sky,
Or stand her cockshies at the cocoa-shy,
Or buy her brooches with her name in red,
Or Queen Victoria done in gingerbread.

Then there are rifle shots at tossing balls,
'And if you hit you get a good cigar.'
And strength-whackers for lads to lamm with mauls,
And Cheshire cheeses on a greasy spar.
The country folk flock in from near and far,
Women and men, like blow-flies to the roast,
All love the fair; but Anna loved it most.

Anna was all agog to see the fair;
She made Ern promise to be there to meet her,
To arm her round to all the pleasures there,
And buy her ribbons for her neck, and treat her,
So that no woman at the fair should beat her
In having pleasure at a man's expense.
She planned to meet him at the chapel fence.

So Ernie went; and Jimmy took his mother,
Dressed in her finest with a Monmouth shawl,
And there was such a crowd she thought she'd smother,
And O, she loved a pep'mint above all.
Clash go the crockeries where the cheapjacks bawl,
Baa go the sheep, thud goes the waxwork's drum,
And Ernie cursed for Anna hadn't come.

He hunted for her up and down the place,
Raging and snapping like a working brew.
'If you're with someone else I'll smash his face,
And when I've done for him I'll go for you.'
He bought no fairings as he'd vowed to do
For his poor little children back at home
Stuck at the glass 'to see till father come.'

Not finding her, he went into an inn,

Busy with ringing till and scratching matches.
Where thirsty drovers mingled stout with gin
And three or four Welsh herds were singing catches.
The swing-doors clattered, letting in in snatches
The noises of the fair, now low, now loud.
Ern called for beer and glowered at the crowd.

While he was glowering at his drinking there
In came the gipsy Bessie, hawking toys;
A bold-eyed strapping harlot with black hair,
One of the tribe which camped at Shepherd's Bois.
She lured him out of inn into the noise
Of the steam-organ where the horses spun,
And so the end of all things was begun.

Newness in lust, always the old in love.
'Put up your toys,' he said, 'and come along,
We'll have a turn of swing-boats up above,
And see the murder when they strike the gong.'
'Don't 'ee,' she giggled. 'My, but ain't you strong.
And where's your proper girl? You don't know me.'
'I do.' 'You don't.' 'Why, then, I will,' said he.

Anna was late because the cart which drove her
Called for her late (the horse had broke a trace),
She was all dressed and scented for her lover,
Her bright blue blouse had imitation lace,
The paint was red as roses on her face,
She hummed a song, because she thought to see
How envious all the other girls would be.

When she arrived and found her Ernie gone,
Her bitter heart thought, 'This is how it is.
Keeping me waiting while the sports are on:
Promising faithful, too, and then to miss.
O, Ernie, won't I give it you for this.'
And looking up she saw a couple cling,
Ern with his arm round Bessie in the swing.

Ern caught her eye and spat, and cut her dead,

Bessie laughed hardly, in the gipsy way.
Anna, though blind with fury, tossed her head,
Biting her lips until the red was grey,
For bitter moments given, bitter pay,
The time for payment comes, early or late,
No earthly debtor but accounts to Fate.

She turned aside, telling with bitter oaths
What Ern should suffer if he turned agen,
And there was Jimmy stripping off his clothes
Within a little ring of farming men.
'Now, Jimmy, put the old tup into pen.'
His mother, watching, thought her heart would curdle,
To see Jim drag the old ram to the hurdle.

Then the ram butted and the game began,
Till Jimmy's muscles cracked and the ram grunted.
The good old wrestling game of Ram and Man,
At which none knows the hunter from the hunted.
'Come and see Jimmy have his belly bunted.'
'Good tup. Good Jim. Good Jimmy. Sick him, Rover,
By dang, but Jimmy's got him fairly over.'

Then there was clap of hands and Jimmy grinned
And took five silver shillings from his backers,
And said th'old tup had put him out of wind
Or else he'd take all comers at the Whackers.
And some made rude remarks of rams and knackers,
And mother shook to get her son alone,
So's to be sure he hadn't broke a bone.

None but the lucky man deserves the fair,
For lucky men have money and success,
Things that a whore is very glad to share,
Or dip, at least, a finger in the mess.
Anne, with her raddled cheeks and Sunday dress,
Smiled upon Jimmy, seeing him succeed,
As though to say, 'You are a man, indeed.'

All the great things of life are swiftly done,

Creation, death, and love the double gate.
However much we dawdle in the sun
We have to hurry at the touch of Fate;
When Life knocks at the door no one can wait,
When Death makes his arrest we have to go.
And so with love, and Jimmy found it so.

Love, the sharp spear, went pricking to the bone,
In that one look, desire and bitter aching,
Longing to have that woman all alone
For her dear beauty's sake all else forsaking;
And sudden agony that set him shaking
Lest she, whose beauty made his heart's blood cruddle,
Should be another man's to kiss and cuddle.

She was beside him when he left the ring,
Her soft dress brushed against him as he passed her;
He thought her penny scent a sweeter thing
Than precious ointment out of alabaster;
Love, the mild servant, makes a drunken master.
She smiled, half sadly, out of thoughtful eyes,
And all the strong young man was easy prize.

She spoke, to take him, seeing him a sheep,
'How beautiful you wrastled with the ram,
It made me all go tremble just to peep,
I am that fond of wrastling, that I am.
Why, here's your mother, too. Good-evening, ma'am.
I was just telling Jim how well he done,
How proud you must be of so fine a son.'

Old mother blinked, while Jimmy hardly knew
Whether he knew the woman there or not;
But well he knew, if not, he wanted to,
Joy of her beauty ran in him so hot,
Old trembling mother by him was forgot,
While Anna searched the mother's face, to know
Whether she took her for a whore or no.

The woman's maxim, 'Win the woman first,'

Made her be gracious to the withered thing.
'This being in crowds do give one such a thirst,
I wonder if they've tea going at "The King"?
My throat's that dry my very tongue do cling,
Perhaps you'd take my arm, we'd wander up
(If you'd agree) and try and get a cup.

Come, ma'am, a cup of tea would do you good;
There's nothing like a nice hot cup of tea
After the crowd and all the time you've stood;
And "The King's" strict, it isn't like "The Key,"
Now, take my arm, my dear, and lean on me.'
And Jimmy's mother, being nearly blind,
Took Anna's arm, and only thought her kind.

So off they set, with Anna talking to her,
How nice the tea would be after the crowd,
And mother thinking half the time she knew her,
And Jimmy's heart's blood ticking quick and loud,
And Death beside him knitting at his shroud,
And all the High Street babbling with the fair,
And white October clouds in the blue air.

So tea was made, and down they sat to drink;
O the pale beauty sitting at the board!
There is more death in women than we think,
There is much danger in the soul adored,
The white hands bring the poison and the cord;
Death has a lodge in lips as red as cherries,
Death has a mansion in the yew-tree berries.

They sat there talking after tea was done,
And Jimmy blushed at Anna's sparkling looks,
And Anna flattered mother on her son,
Catching both fishes on her subtle hooks.
With twilight, tea and talk in ingle-nooks,
And music coming up from the dim street,
Mother had never known a fair so sweet.

Now cow-bells clink, for milking-time is come,

The drovers stack the hurdles into carts,
New masters drive the straying cattle home,
Many a young calf from his mother parts,
Hogs straggle back to sty by fits and starts;
The farmers take a last glass at the inns,
And now the frolic of the fair begins.

All of the side shows of the fair are lighted,
Flares and bright lights, and brassy cymbals clanging,
'Beginning now' and 'Everyone's invited,'
Shatter the pauses of the organ's whanging,
The Oldest Show on Earth and the Last Hanging,
'The Murder in the Red Barn,' with real blood,
The rifles crack, the Sally shy-sticks thud.

Anna walked slowly homewards with her prey,
Holding old tottering mother's weight upon her,
And pouring in sweet poison on the way
Of 'Such a pleasure, ma'am, and such an honour,'
And 'One's so safe with such a son to con her
Through all the noises and through all the press,
Boys daredn't squirt tormenters on her dress.'

At mother's door they stop to say 'Good-night.'
And mother must go in to set the table.
Anna pretended that she felt a fright
To go alone through all the merry babel:
'My friends are waiting at "The Cain and Abel,"
Just down the other side of Market Square,
It'd be a mercy if you'd set me there.'

So Jimmy came, while mother went inside;
Anna has got her victim in her clutch.
Jimmy, all blushing, glad to be her guide,
Thrilled by her scent, and trembling at her touch.
She was all white and dark, and said not much;
She sighed, to hint that pleasure's grave was dug,
And smiled within to see him such a mug.

They passed the doctor's house among the trees,

She sighed so deep that Jimmy asked her why.
'I'm too unhappy upon nights like these,
When everyone has happiness but I!'
'Then, aren't you happy?' She appeared to cry,
Blinked with her eyes, and turned away her head:
'Not much; but some men understand,' she said.

Her voice caught lightly on a broken note,
Jimmy half-dared but dared not touch her hand,
Yet all his blood went pumping in his throat
Beside the beauty he could understand,
And Death stopped knitting at the muffling band.
'The shroud is done,' he muttered, 'toe to chin.'
He snapped the ends, and tucked his needles in.

Jimmy, half stammering, choked, 'Has any man----'
He stopped, she shook her head to answer 'No.'
'Then tell me.' 'No. P'raps some day, if I can.
It hurts to talk of some things ever so.
But you're so different. There, come, we must go
None but unhappy women know how good
It is to meet a soul who's understood.'

'No. Wait a moment. May I call you Anna?'
'Perhaps. There must be nearness 'twixt us two.'
Love in her face hung out his bloody banner,
And all love's clanging trumpets shocked and blew.
'When we got up to-day we never knew.'
'I'm sure I didn't think, nor you did.' 'Never.'
'And now this friendship's come to us for ever.'

'Now, Anna, take my arm, dear.' 'Not to-night,
That must come later when we know our minds,
We must agree to keep this evening white,
We'll eat the fruit to-night and save the rinds.'
And all the folk whose shadows darked the blinds,
And all the dancers whirling in the fair,
Were wretched worms to Jim and Anna there.

'How wonderful life is,' said Anna, lowly.

'But it begins again with you for friend.'
In the dim lamplight Jimmy thought her holy,
A lovely fragile thing for him to tend,
Grace beyond measure, beauty without end.
'Anna,' he said; 'Good-night. This is the door.
I never knew what people meant before.'

'Good-night, my friend. Good-bye.' 'But, O my sweet,
The night's quite early yet, don't say good-bye,
Come just another short turn down the street,
The whole life's bubbling up for you and I.
Somehow I feel to-morrow we may die.
Come just as far as to the blacksmith's light.'
But 'No' said Anna; 'Not to-night. Good-night.'

All the tides triumph when the white moon fills.
Down in the race the toppling waters shout,
The breakers shake the bases of the hills,
There is a thundering where the streams go out,
And the wise shipman puts his ship about
Seeing the gathering of those waters wan,
But what when love makes high tide in a man?

Jimmy walked home with all his mind on fire,
One lovely face for ever set in flame.
He shivered as he went, like tautened wire,
Surge after surge of shuddering in him came
And then swept out repeating one sweet name,
'Anna, O Anna,' to the evening star.
Anna was sipping whiskey in the bar.

So back to home and mother Jimmy wandered,
Thinking of Plaister's End and Anna's lips.
He ate no supper worth the name, but pondered
On Plaister's End hedge, scarlet with ripe hips,
And of the lovely moon there in eclipse,
And how she must be shining in the house
Behind the hedge of those old dog-rose boughs.

Old mother cleared away. The clock struck eight.

'Why, boy, you've left your bacon, lawks a me,
So that's what comes of having tea so late,
Another time you'll go without your tea.
Your father liked his cup, too, didn't he,
Always "another cup" he used to say,
He never went without on any day.

How nice the lady was and how she talked,
I've never had a nicer fair, not ever.'
'She said she'd like to see us if we walked
To Plaister's End, beyond by Watersever.
Nice-looking woman, too, and that, and clever;
We might go round one evening, p'raps, we two;
Or I might go, if it's too far for you.'

'No,' said the mother, 'we're not folk for that;
Meet at the fair and that, and there an end.
Rake out the fire and put out the cat,
These fairs are sinful, tempting folk to spend.
Of course she spoke polite and like a friend;
Of course she had to do, and so I let her,
But now it's done and past, so I forget her.'

'I don't see why forget her. Why forget her?
She treat us kind. She weren't like everyone.
I never saw a woman I liked better,
And he's not easy pleased, my father's son.
So I'll go round some night when work is done.'
'Now, Jim, my dear, trust mother, there's a dear.'
'Well, so I do, but sometimes you're so queer.'

She blinked at him out of her withered eyes
Below her lashless eyelids red and bleared.
Her months of sacrifice had won the prize,
Her Jim had come to what she always feared.
And yet she doubted, so she shook and peered
And begged her God not let a woman take
The lovely son whom she had starved to make.

Doubting, she stood the dishes in the rack,

'We'll ask her in some evening, then,' she said,
'How nice her hair looked in the bit of black.'
And still she peered from eyes all dim and red
To note at once if Jimmy drooped his head,
Or if his ears blushed when he heard her praised,
And Jimmy blushed and hung his head and gazed.

'This is the end,' she thought. 'This is the end.
I'll have to sew again for Mr Jones,
Do hems when I can hardly see to mend,
And have the old ache in my marrow-bones.
And when his wife's in child-bed, when she groans,
She'll send for me until the pains have ceased,
And give me leavings at the christening feast.

And sit aslant to eye me as I eat,
"You're only wanted here, ma'am, for to-day,
Just for the christ'ning party, for the treat,
Don't ever think I mean to let you stay;
Two's company, three's none, that's what I say."
Life can be bitter to the very bone
When one is poor, and woman, and alone.

'Jimmy,' she said, still doubting, 'Come, my dear,
Let's have our "Binger," 'fore we go to bed,'
And then 'The parson's dog,' she cackled clear,
'Lep over stile,' she sang, nodding her head.
'His name was little Binger.' 'Jim,' she said,
'Binger, now, chorus' ... Jimmy kicked the hob,
The sacrament of song died in a sob.

Jimmy went out into the night to think
Under the moon so steady in the blue.
The woman's beauty ran in him like drink,
The fear that men had loved her burnt him through;
The fear that even then another knew
All the deep mystery which women make
To hide the inner nothing made him shake.

'Anna, I love you, and I always shall.'

He looked towards Plaister's End beyond Cot Hills.
A white star glimmered in the long canal,
A droning from the music came in thrills.
Love is a flame to burn out human wills,
Love is a flame to set the will on fire,
Love is a flame to cheat men into mire.

One of the three, we make Love what we choose,
But Jimmy did not know, he only thought
That Anna was too beautiful to lose,
That she was all the world and he was naught,
That it was sweet, though bitter, to be caught.
'Anna, I love you.' Underneath the moon,
'I shall go mad unless I see you soon.'

The fair's lights threw aloft a misty glow.
The organ whangs, the giddy horses reel,
The rifles cease, the folk begin to go,
The hands unclamp the swing-boats from the wheel,
There is a smell of trodden orange peel;
The organ drones and dies, the horses stop,
And then the tent collapses from the top.

The fair is over, let the people troop,
The drunkards stagger homewards down the gutters,
The showmen heave in an excited group,
The poles tilt slowly down, the canvas flutters,
The mauls knock out the pins, the last flare sputters.
'Lower away.' 'Go easy.' 'Lower, lower.'
'You've dang near knock my skull in. Loose it slower.'

'Back in the horses.' 'Are the swing-boats loaded?'
'All right to start.' 'Bill, where's the cushion gone?
The red one for the Queen?' 'I think I stowed it.'
'You think, you think. Lord, where's that cushion, John?'
'It's in that bloody box you're sitting on,
What more d'you want?' A concertina plays
Far off as wandering lovers go their ways.

Up the dim Bye Street to the market-place

The dead bones of the fair are borne in carts,
Horses and swing-boats at a funeral pace
After triumphant hours quickening hearts;
A policeman eyes each waggon as it starts,
The drowsy showmen stumble half asleep,
One of them catcalls, having drunken deep.

So out, over the pass, into the plain,
And the dawn finds them filling empty cans
In some sweet-smelling dusty country lane,
Where a brook chatters over rusty pans.
The iron chimneys of the caravans
Smoke as they go. And now the fair has gone
To find a new pitch somewhere further on.

But as the fair moved out two lovers came,
Ernie and Bessie loitering out together;
Bessie with wild eyes, hungry as a flame,
Ern like a stallion tugging at a tether.
It was calm moonlight, and October weather,
So still, so lovely, as they topped the ridge.
They brushed by Jimmy standing on the bridge.

And, as they passed, they gravely eyed each other,
And the blood burned in each heart beating there;
And out into the Bye Street tottered mother,
Without her shawl, in the October air.
'Jimmy,' she cried, 'Jimmy.' And Bessie's hair
Drooped on the instant over Ernie's face,
And the two lovers clung in an embrace.

'O, Ern.' 'My own, my Bessie.' As they kissed
Jimmy was envious of the thing unknown.
So this was Love, the something he had missed,
Woman and man athirst, aflame, alone.
Envy went knocking at his marrow-bone,
And Anna's face swam up so dim, so fair,
Shining and sweet, with poppies in her hair.

III

After the fair, the gang began again.
Tipping the trollies down the banks of earth.
The truck of stone clanks on the endless chain,
A clever pony guides it to its berth.
'Let go.' It tips, the navvies shout for mirth
To see the pony step aside, so wise,
But Jimmy sighed, thinking of Anna's eyes.

And when he stopped his shovelling he looked
Over the junipers towards Plaister way,
The beauty of his darling had him hooked,
He had no heart for wrastling with the clay.
'O Lord Almighty, I must get away;
O Lord, I must. I must just see my flower,
Why, I could run there in the dinner hour.'

The whistle on the pilot engine blew,
The men knocked off, and Jimmy slipped aside
Over the fence, over the bridge, and through,
And then ahead along the water-side,
Under the red-brick rail-bridge, arching wide,
Over the hedge, across the fields, and on;
The foreman asked: 'Where's Jimmy Gurney gone?'

It is a mile and more to Plaister's End,
But Jimmy ran the short way by the stream,
And there was Anna's cottage at the bend,
With blue smoke on the chimney, faint as steam.
'God, she's at home,' and up his heart a gleam
Leapt like a rocket on November nights,
And shattered slowly in a burst of lights.

Anna was singing at her kitchen fire,
She was surprised, and not well pleased to see
A sweating navvy, red with heat and mire,
Come to her door, whoever he might be.

But when she saw that it was Jimmy, she
Smiled at his eyes upon her, full of pain,
And thought, 'But, still, he mustn't come again.

People will talk; boys are such crazy things;
But he's a dear boy though he is so green.'
So, hurriedly, she slipped her apron strings,
And dabbed her hair, and wiped her fingers clean,
And came to greet him languid as a queen,
Looking as sweet, as fair, as pure, as sad,
As when she drove her loving husband mad.

'Poor boy,' she said, 'Poor boy, how hot you are.'
She laid a cool hand to his sweating face.
'How kind to come. Have you been running far?
I'm just going out; come up the road a pace.
O dear, these hens; they're all about the place.'
So Jimmy shooed the hens at her command,
And got outside the gate as she had planned.

'Anna, my dear, I love you; love you, true;
I had to come--I don't know--I can't rest--
I lay awake all night, thinking of you.
Many must love you, but I love you best.'
'Many have loved me, yes, dear,' she confessed,
She smiled upon him with a tender pride,
'But my love ended when my husband died.

Still, we'll be friends, dear friends, dear, tender friends;
Love with its fever's at an end for me.
Be by me gently now the fever ends,
Life is a lovelier thing than lovers see,
I'd like to trust a man, Jimmy,' said she,
'May I trust you?' 'Oh, Anna dear, my dear----
'Don't come so close,' she said, 'with people near.

Dear, don't be vexed; it's very sweet to find
One who will understand; but life is life,
And those who do not know are so unkind.
But you'll be by me, Jimmy, in the strife,

I love you though I cannot be your wife;
And now be off, before the whistle goes,
Or else you'll lose your quarter, goodness knows.'

'When can I see you, Anna? Tell me, dear.
To-night? To-morrow? Shall I come to-night?
'Jimmy, my friend, I cannot have you here;
But when I come to town perhaps we might.
Dear, you must go; no kissing; you can write,
And I'll arrange a meeting when I learn
What friends are doing' (meaning Shepherd Ern).

'Good-bye, my own.' 'Dear Jim, you understand.
If we were only free, dear, free to meet,
Dear, I would take you by your big, strong hand
And kiss your dear boy eyes so blue and sweet;
But my dead husband lies under the sheet,
Dead in my heart, dear, lovely, lonely one,
So, Jim, my dear, my loving days are done.

But though my heart is buried in his grave
Something might be--friendship and utter trust--
And you, my dear starved little Jim shall have
Flowers of friendship from my dead heart's dust;
Life would be sweet if men would never lust.
Why do you, Jimmy? Tell me sometime, dear,
Why men are always what we women fear.

Not now. Good-bye; we understand, we two,
And life, O Jim, how glorious life is;
This sunshine in my heart is due to you;
I was so sad, and life has given this.
I think "I wish I had something of his,"
Do give me something, will you be so kind?
Something to keep you always in my mind.

'I will,' he said. 'Now go, or you'll be late.'
He broke from her and ran, and never dreamt
That as she stood to watch him from the gate
Her heart was half amusement, half contempt,

Comparing Jim the squab, red and unkempt,
In sweaty corduroys, with Shepherd Ern.
She blew him kisses till he passed the turn.

The whistle blew before he reached the line;
The foreman asked him what the hell he meant,
Whether a duke had asked him out to dine,
Or if he thought the bag would pay his rent?
And Jim was fined before the foreman went.
But still his spirit glowed from Anna's words,
Cooed in the voice so like a singing bird's.

'O Anna, darling, you shall have a present;
I'd give you golden gems if I were rich,
And everything that's sweet and all that's pleasant.'
He dropped his pick as though he had a stitch,
And stared tow'rds Plaister's End, past Bushe's Pitch.
O beauty, what I have to give I'll give,
All mine is yours, beloved, while I live.'

All through the afternoon his pick was slacking,
His eyes were always turning west and south,
The foreman was inclined to send him packing,
But put it down to after fair-day drouth;
He looked at Jimmy with an ugly mouth,
And Jimmy slacked, and muttered in a moan,
'My love, my beautiful, my very own.'

So she had loved. Another man had had her;
She had been his with passion in the night;
An agony of envy made him sadder,
Yet stabbed a pang of bitter-sweet delight--
O he would keep his image of her white.
The foreman cursed, stepped up, and asked him flat
What kind of gum-tree he was gaping at.

It was Jim's custom, when the pay day came,
To take his weekly five and twenty shilling
Back in the little packet to his dame;
Not taking out a farthing for a filling,

Nor twopence for a pot, for he was willing
That she should have it all to save or spend.
But love makes many lovely customs end.

Next pay day came and Jimmy took the money,
But not to mother, for he meant to buy
A thirteen-shilling locket for his honey,
Whatever bellies hungered and went dry,
A silver heart-shape with a ruby eye.
He bought the thing and paid the shopman's price,
And hurried off to make the sacrifice.

'Is it for me? You dear, dear generous boy.
How sweet of you. I'll wear it in my dress.
When you're beside me life is such a joy,
You bring the sun to solitariness.'
She brushed his jacket with a light caress,
His arms went round her fast, she yielded meek;
He had the happiness to kiss her cheek.

'My dear, my dear.' 'My very dear, my Jim,
How very kind my Jimmy is to me;
I ache to think that some are harsh to him;
Not like my Jimmy, beautiful and free.
My darling boy, how lovely it would be
If all would trust as we two trust each other.'
And Jimmy's heart grew hard against his mother.

She, poor old soul, was waiting in the gloom
For Jimmy's pay, that she could do the shopping.
The clock ticked out a solemn tale of doom;
Clogs on the bricks outside went clippa-clopping,
The owls were coming out and dew was dropping.
The bacon burnt, and Jimmy not yet home.
The clock was ticking dooms out like a gnome.

'What can have kept him that he doesn't come?
O God, they'd tell me if he'd come to hurt.'
The unknown, unseen evil struck her numb,
She saw his body bloody in the dirt,

She saw the life blood pumping through the shirt,
She saw him tipsy in the navvies' booth,
She saw all forms of evil but the truth.

At last she hurried up the line to ask
If Jim were hurt or why he wasn't back.
She found the watchman wearing through his task;
Over the fire basket in his shack;
Behind, the new embankment rose up black.
'Gurney?' he said. 'He'd got to see a friend.'
'Where?' 'I dunno. I think out Plaister's End.

Thanking the man, she tottered down the hill,
The long-feared fang had bitten to the bone.
The brook beside her talked as water will
That it was lonely singing all alone,
The night was lonely with the water's tone,
And she was lonely to the very marrow.
Love puts such bitter poison on Fate's arrow.

She went the long way to them by the mills,
She told herself that she must find her son.
The night was ominous of many ills;
The soughing larch-clump almost made her run,
Her boots hurt (she had got a stone in one)
And bitter beaks were tearing at her liver
That her boy's heart was turned from her forever.

She kept the lane, past Spindle's, past the Callows',
Her lips still muttering prayers against the worst,
And there were people coming from the sallows,
Along the wild duck patch by Beggar's Hurst.
Being in moonlight mother saw them first,
She saw them moving in the moonlight dim,
A woman with a sweet voice saying 'Jim.'

Trembling she grovelled down into the ditch,
They wandered past her pressing side to side.
'O Anna, my belov'd, if I were rich.'
It was her son, and Anna's voice replied,

'Dear boy, dear beauty boy, my love and pride.'
And he: 'It's but a silver thing, but I
Will earn you better lockets by and bye.'

'Dear boy, you mustn't.' 'But I mean to do.'
'What was that funny sort of noise I heard?'
'Where?' 'In the hedge; a sort of sob or coo.
Listen. It's gone.' 'It may have been a bird.'
Jim tossed a stone but mother never stirred.
She hugged the hedgerow, choking down her pain,
While the hot tears were blinding in her brain.

The two passed on, the withered woman rose,
For many minutes she could only shake,
Staring ahead with trembling little 'Oh's,'
The noise a very frightened child might make.
'O God, dear God, don't let the woman take
My little son, God, not my little Jim.
O God, I'll have to starve if I lose him.'

So back she trembled, nodding with her head,
Laughing and trembling in the bursts of tears,
Her ditch-filled boots both squelching in the tread,
Her shopping-bonnet sagging to her ears,
Her heart too dumb with brokenness for fears.
The nightmare whickering with the laugh of death
Could not have added terror to her breath.

She reached the house, and: 'I'm all right,' said she,
'I'll just take off my things; but I'm all right,
'I'd be all right with just a cup of tea,
If I could only get this grate to light,
The paper's damp and Jimmy's late to-night;
"Belov'd, if I was rich," was what he said,
O Jim, I wish that God would kill me dead.'

While she was blinking at the unlit grate,
Scratching the moistened match-heads off the wood,
She heard Jim coming, so she reached his plate,
And forked the over-frizzled scraps of food.

'You're late,' she said, 'and this yer isn't good,
Whatever makes you come in late like this?'
'I've been to Plaister's End, that's how it is.'

'You've been to Plaister's End?'
'Yes.'
'I've been staying
For money for the shopping ever so.
Down here we can't get victuals without paying,
There's no trust down the Bye Street, as you know,
And now it's dark and it's too late to go.
You've been to Plaister's End. What took you there?'
'The lady who was with us at the fair.'

'The lady, eh? The lady?'
'Yes, the lady.'
'You've been to see her?'
'Yes.'
'What happened then?'
'I saw her.'
'Yes. And what filth did she trade ye?
Or d'you expect your locket back agen?
I know the rotten ways of whores with men.
What did it cost ye?'
'What did what cost?'
'It.
Your devil's penny for the devil's bit.'

'I don't know what you mean.'
'Jimmy, my own.
Don't lie to mother, boy, for mother knows.
I know you and that lady to the bone,
And she's a whore, that thing you call a rose,
A whore who takes whatever male thing goes;
A harlot with the devil's skill to tell
The special key of each man's door to hell.'

'She's not. She's nothing of the kind, I tell'ee.'
'You can't tell women like a woman can;
A beggar tells a lie to fill his belly,

A strumpet tells a lie to win a man,
Women were liars since the world began;
And she's a liar, branded in the eyes,
A rotten liar, who inspires lies.'

'I say she's not.'
'No, don't'ee Jim, my dearie,
You've seen her often in the last few days,
She's given a love as makes you come in weary
To lie to me before going out to laze.
She's tempted you into the devil's ways,
She's robbing you, full fist, of what you earn,
In God's name, what's she giving in return?'

'Her faith, my dear, and that's enough for me.'
'Her faith. Her faith. O Jimmy, listen, dear;
Love doesn't ask for faith, my son, not he;
He asks for life throughout the live-long year,
And life's a test for any plough to ere
Life tests a plough in meadows made of stones,
Love takes a toll of spirit, mind and bones.

I know a woman's portion when she loves,
It's hers to give, my darling, not to take;
It isn't lockets, dear, nor pairs of gloves,
It isn't marriage bells nor wedding cake,
It's up and cook, although the belly ache;
And bear the child, and up and work again,
And count a sick man's grumble worth the pain.

Will she do this, and fifty times as much?'
'No. I don't ask her.'
'No. I warrant, no.
She's one to get a young fool in her clutch,
And you're a fool to let her trap you so.
She love you? She? O Jimmy, let her go;
I was so happy, dear, before she came,
And now I'm going to the grave in shame.

I bore you, Jimmy, in this very room.

xxx

For fifteen years I got you all you had,
You were my little son, made in my womb,
Left all to me, for God had took your dad,
You were a good son, doing all I bade,
Until this strumpet came from God knows where,
And now you lie, and I am in despair.

Jimmy, I won't say more. I know you think
That I don't know, being just a withered old,
With chaps all fallen in and eyes that blink,
And hands that tremble so they cannot hold.
A bag of bones to put in churchyard mould,
A red-eyed hag beside your evening star.'
And Jimmy gulped, and thought 'By God, you are.'

'Well, if I am, my dear, I don't pretend.
I got my eyes red, Jimmy, making you.
My dear, before our love time's at an end
Think just a minute what it is you do.
If this were right, my dear, you'd tell me true;
You don't, and so it's wrong; you lie; and she
Lies too, or else you wouldn't lie to me.

Women and men have only got one way
And that way's marriage; other ways are lust.
If you must marry this one, then you may,
If not you'll drop her.'
'No.' 'I say you must.
Or bring my hairs with sorrow to the dust.
Marry your whore, you'll pay, and there an end.
My God, you shall not have a whore for friend.

By God, you shall not, not while I'm alive.
Never, so help me God, shall that thing be.
If she's a woman fit to touch she'll wive,
If not she's whore, and she shall deal with me.
And may God's blessed mercy help us see
And may He make my Jimmy count the cost,
My little boy who's lost, as I am lost.'

People in love cannot be won by kindness,
And opposition makes them feel like martyrs.
When folk are crazy with a drunken blindness,
It's best to flog them with each other's garters,
And have the flogging done by Shropshire carters,
Born under Ercall where the while stones lie;
Ercall that smells of honey in July.

Jimmy said nothing in reply, but thought
That mother was an old, hard jealous thing.
'I'll love my girl through good and ill report,
I shall be true whatever grief it bring.'
And in his heart he heard the death-bell ring
For mother's death, and thought what it would be
To bury her in churchyard and be free.

He saw the narrow grave under the wall,
Home without mother nagging at his dear,
And Anna there with him at evenfall,
Bidding him dry his eyes and be of cheer.
'The death that took poor mother brings me near,
Nearer than we have ever been before,
Near as the dead one came, but dearer, more.'

'Good-night, my son,' said mother. 'Night,' he said.
He dabbed her brow wi's lips and blew the light,
She lay quite silent crying on the bed,
Stirring no limb, but crying through the night.
He slept, convinced that he was Anna's knight.
And when he went to work he left behind
Money for mother crying herself blind.

After that night he came to Anna's call,
He was a fly in Anna's subtle weavings,
Mother had no more share in him at all;
All that the mother had was Anna's leavings.
There were more lies, more lockets, more deceivings,
Taunts from the proud old woman, lies from him,
And Anna's coo of 'Cruel. Leave her, Jim.'

Also the foreman spoke: 'You make me sick,
You come-day-go-day-God-send-plenty-beer.
You put less mizzle on your bit of Dick,
Or get your time, I'll have no slackers here,
I've had my eye on you too long, my dear.'
And Jimmy pondered while the man attacked,
'I'd see her all day long if I were sacked.'

And trembling mother thought, 'I'll go to see'r.
She'd give me back my boy if she were told
Just what he is to me, my pretty dear:
She wouldn't leave me starving in the cold,
Like what I am.' But she was weak and old.
She thought, 'But if I ask her, I'm afraid
He'd hate me ever after,' so she stayed.

IV

Bessie, the gipsy, got with child by Ern,
She joined her tribe again at Shepherd's Meen,
In that old quarry overgrown with fern,
Where goats are tethered on the patch of green.
There she reflected on the fool she'd been,
And plaited kipes and waited for the bastard,
And thought that love was glorious while it lasted.

And Ern the moody man went moody home,
To that most gentle girl from Ercall Hill,
And bade her take a heed now he had come,
Or else, by cripes, he'd put her through the mill.
He didn't want her love, he'd had his fill,
Thank you, of her, the bread and butter sack.
And Anna heard that Shepherd Ern was back.

'Back. And I'll have him back to me,' she muttered,

'This lovesick boy of twenty, green as grass,
Has made me wonder if my brains are buttered,
He, and his lockets, and his love, the ass.
I don't know why he comes. Alas! alas!
God knows I want no love; but every sun
I bolt my doors on some poor loving one.

It breaks my heart to turn them out of doors,
I hear them crying to me in the rain;
One, with a white face, curses, one implores,
"Anna, for God's sake, let me in again,
Anna, belov'd, I cannot bear the pain."
Like hoovey sheep bleating outside a fold
"Anna, belov'd, I'm in the wind and cold."

I want no men. I'm weary to the soul
Of men like moths about a candle flame,
Of men like flies about a sugar bowl,
Acting alike, and all wanting the same,
My dreamed-of swirl of passion never came,
No man has given me the love I dreamed,
But in the best of each one something gleamed.

If my dear darling were alive, but he...
He was the same; he didn't understand.
The eyes of that dead child are haunting me,
I only turned the blanket with my hand.
It didn't hurt, he died as I had planned.
A little skinny creature, weak and red;
It looked so peaceful after it was dead.

I have been all alone, in spite of all.
Never a light to help me place my feet:
I have had many a pain and many a fall.
Life's a long headache in a noisy street,
Love at the budding looks so very sweet,
Men put such bright disguises on their lust,
And then it all goes crumble into dust.

Jimmy the same, dear, lovely Jimmy, too,

xxxiv

He goes the self-same way the others went:
I shall bring sorrow to those eyes of blue.
He asks the love I'm sure I never meant.
Am I to blame? And all his money spent!
Men make this shutting doors such cruel pain.
O, Ern, I want you in my life again.'

On Sunday afternoons the lovers walk
Arm within arm, dressed in their Sunday best,
The man with the blue necktie sucks a stalk,
The woman answers when she is addressed.
On quiet country stiles they sit to rest,
And after fifty years of wear and tear
They think how beautiful their courtships were.

Jimmy and Anna met to walk together
The Sunday after Shepherd Ern returned;
And Anna's hat was lovely with a feather
Bought and dyed blue with money Jimmy earned.
They walked towards Callows Farm, and Anna yearned:
'Dear boy,' she said, 'This road is dull to-day,
Suppose we turn and walk the other way.'

They turned, she sighed. 'What makes you sigh?' he asked.
'Thinking,' she said, 'thinking and grieving, too.
Perhaps some wicked woman will come masked
Into your life, my dear, to ruin you.
And trusting every woman as you do
It might mean death to love and be deceived;
You'd take it hard, I thought, and so I grieved.'

'Dear one, dear Anna.' 'O my lovely boy,
Life is all golden to the finger tips.
What will be must be: but to-day's a joy.
Reach me that lovely branch of scarlet hips.'
He reached and gave; she put it to her lips.
'And here,' she said, 'we come to Plaister Turns.'
And then she chose the road to Shepherd Ern's.

As the deft angler, when the fishes rise,

Flicks on the broadening circle over each
The delicatest touch of dropping flies,
Then pulls more line and whips a longer reach,
Longing to feel the rod bend, the reel screech,
And the quick comrade net the monster out,
So Anna played the fly over her trout.

Twice she passed, thrice, she with the boy beside her,
A lovely fly, hooked for a human heart,
She passed his little gate, while Jimmy eyed her,
Feeling her beauty tear his soul apart:
Then did the great trout rise, the great pike dart,
The gate went clack, a man came up the hill,
The lucky strike had hooked him through the gill.

Her breath comes quick, her tired beauty glows,
She would not look behind, she looked ahead.
It seemed to Jimmy she was like a rose,
A golden white rose faintly flushed with red.
Her eyes danced quicker at the approaching tread,
Her finger nails dug sharp into her palm.
She yearned to Jimmy's shoulder, and kept calm.

'Evening,' said Shepherd Ern. She turned and eyed him,
Cold and surprised, but interested too,
To see how much he felt the hook inside him,
And how much be surmised, and Jimmy knew,
And if her beauty still could make him do
The love tricks he had gambolled in the past.
A glow shot through her that her fish was grassed.

'Evening,' she said. 'Good evening.' Jimmy felt
Jealous and angry at the shepherd's tone;
He longed to hit the fellow's nose a belt,
He wanted his beloved his alone.
A fellow's girl should be a fellow's own.
Ern gave the lad a glance and turned to Anna,
Jim might have been in China by his manner.

'Still walking out?' 'As you are.' 'I'll be bound.'

'Can you talk gipsy yet, or plait a kipe?'
'I'll teach you if I can when I come round.'
'And when will that be?' 'When the time is ripe.'
And Jimmy longed to hit the man a swipe
Under the chin to knock him out of time,
But Anna stayed: she still had twigs to lime.

'Come, Anna, come, my dear,' he muttered low.
She frowned, and blinked and spoke again to Ern.
'I hear the gipsy has a row to hoe.'
'The more you hear,' he said, 'the less you'll learn.'
'We've just come out,' she said, 'to take a turn;
Suppose you come along: the more the merrier.'
'All right,' he said, 'but how about the terrier?'

He cocked an eye at Jimmy. 'Does he bite?'
Jimmy blushed scarlet. 'He's a dear,' said she.
Ern walked a step, 'Will you be in to-night?'
She shook her head, 'I doubt if that may be.
Jim, here's a friend who wants to talk to me,
So will you go and come another day?'
'By crimes, I won't!' said Jimmy, 'I shall stay.'

'I thought he bit,' said Ern, and Anna smiled,
And Jimmy saw the smile and watched her face
While all the jealous devils made him wild;
A third in love is always out of place;
And then her gentle body full of grace
Leaned to him sweetly as she tossed her head,
'Perhaps we two'll be getting on,' she said.

They walked, but Jimmy turned to watch the third.
'I'm here, not you,' he said; the shepherd grinned:
Anna was smiling sweet without a word;
She got the scarlet berry branch unpinned.
'It's cold,' she said, 'this evening, in the wind.'
A quick glance showed that Jimmy didn't mind her,
She beckoned with the berry branch behind her,

Then dropped it gently on the broken stones,

Preoccupied, unheeding, walking straight,
Saying 'You jealous boy,' in even tones,
Looking so beautiful, so delicate,
Being so very sweet: but at her gate
She felt her shoe unlaced and looked to know
If Ern had taken up the sprig or no.

He had, she smiled. 'Anna,' said Jimmy sadly,
'That man's not fit to be a friend of yourn,
He's nobbut just an oaf; I love you madly,
And hearing you speak kind to'm made me burn.
Who is he then?' She answered 'Shepherd Ern,
A pleasant man, an old, old friend of mine.'
'By cripes, then, Anna, drop him, he's a swine.'

'Jimmy,' she said, 'you must have faith in me,
Faith's all the battle in a love like ours.
You must believe, my darling, don't you see
That life to have its sweets must have its sours.
Love isn't always two souls picking flowers.
You must have faith. I give you all I can.
What, can't I say "Good evening" to a man?'

'Yes,' he replied, 'But not a man like him.'
'Why not a man like him?' she said, 'What next?'
By this they'd reached her cottage in the dim,
Among the daisies that the cold had kexed.
'Because I say. Now, Anna, don't be vexed.'
'I'm more than vexed,' she said, 'with words like these.
"You say," indeed. How dare you. Leave me, please.'

'Anna, my Anna.' 'Leave me.' She was cold,
Proud and imperious with a lifting lip,
Blazing within, but outwardly controlled;
He had a colt's first instant of the whip.
The long lash curled to cut a second strip.
'You to presume to teach. Of course, I know
You're mother's Sunday scholar, aren't you? Go.'

She slammed the door behind her, clutching skirts.

xxxviii

'Anna.' He heard her bedroom latches thud.
He learned at last how bitterly love hurts;
He longed to cut her throat and see her blood,
To stamp her blinking eyeballs into mud.
'Anna, by God!' Love's many torments make
That tune soon change to 'Dear, for Jesus' sake.'

He beat the door for her. She never stirred,
But primming bitter lips before her glass;
Admired her hat as though she hadn't heard,
And tried her front hair parted, and in mass.
She heard her lover's hasty footsteps pass.
'He's gone,' she thought. She crouched below the pane,
And heard him cursing as he tramped the lane.

Rage ran in Jimmy as he tramped the night;
Rage, strongly mingled with a youth's disgust
At finding a beloved woman light,
And all her precious beauty dirty dust;
A tinsel-varnish gilded over lust.
Nothing but that. He sat him down to rage,
Beside the stream whose waters never age.

Plashing, it slithered down the tiny fall
To eddy wrinkles in the trembling pool
With that light voice whose music cannot pall,
Always the note of solace, flute-like, cool.
And when hot-headed man has been a fool,
He could not do a wiser thing than go
To that dim pool where purple teazles grow.

He glowered there until suspicion came,
Suspicion, anger's bastard, with mean tongue,
To mutter to him till his heart was flame,
And every fibre of his soul was wrung,
That even then Ern and his Anna clung
Mouth against mouth in passionate embrace.
There was no peace for Jimmy in the place.

Raging he hurried back to learn the truth.

The little swinging wicket glimmered white,
The chimney jagged the skyline like a tooth,
Bells came in swoons for it was Sunday night.
The garden was all dark, but there was light
Up in the little room where Anna slept:
The hot blood beat his brain; he crept, he crept.

Clutching himself to hear, clutching to know,
Along the path, rustling with withered leaves,
Up to the apple, too decayed to blow,
Which crooked a palsied finger at the eaves.
And up the lichened trunk his body heaves.
Dust blinded him, twigs snapped, the branches shook,
He leaned along a mossy bough to look.

Nothing at first, except a guttering candle
Shaking amazing shadows on the ceiling,
Then Anna's voice upon a bar of 'Randal,
Where have you been:' and voice and music reeling,
Trembling, as though she sang with flooding feeling.
The singing stopped midway upon the stair,
Then Anna showed in white with loosened hair.

Her back was towards him, and she stood awhile,
Like a wild creature tossing back her mane,
And then her head went back, he saw a smile
On the half face half turned towards the pane;
Her eyes closed, and her arms went out again.
Jim gritted teeth, and called upon his Maker,
She drooped into a man's arms there to take her.

Agony first, sharp, sudden, like a knife,
Then down the tree to batter at the door;
'Open there. Let me in. I'll have your life.
You Jezebel of hell, you painted whore,
Talk about faith, I'll give you faith galore.'
The window creaked, a jug of water came
Over his head and neck with certain aim.

'Clear out,' said Ern; 'I'm here, not you, to-night,

Clear out. We whip young puppies when they yap.'
'If you're a man,' said Jim, 'Come down and fight,
I'll put a stopper on your ugly chap.'
'Go home,' said Ern; 'Go home and get your pap.
To kennel, pup, and bid your mother bake
Some soothing syrup in your puppy cake.'

There was a dibble sticking in the bed,
Jim wrenched it out and swung it swiftly round,
And sent it flying at the shepherd's head:
'I'll give you puppy-cake. Take that, you hound.'
The broken glass went clinking to the ground,
The dibble balanced, checked, and followed flat.
'My God,' said Ern, 'I'll give you hell for that.'

He flung the door ajar with 'Now, my pup--
Hold up the candle, Anna--now, we'll see.'
'By crimes, come on,' said Jimmy; 'Put them up.
Come, put them up, you coward, here I be.'
And Jim, eleven stone, what chance had he
Against fourteen? but what he could he did;
Ern swung his right: 'That settles you, my kid.'

Jimmy went down and out: 'The kid,' said Ern.
'A kid, a sucking puppy; hold the light.'
And Anna smiled: 'It gave me such a turn,
You look so splendid, Ernie, when you fight.'
She looked at Jim with: 'Ern, is he all right?'
'He's coming to.' She shuddered, 'Pah, the brute.
What things he said'; she stirred him with her foot.

'You go inside,' said Ern, 'and bolt the door,
I'll deal with him.' She went and Jimmy stood.
'Now, pup,' said Ern, 'don't come round here no more.
I'm here, not you, let that be understood.
I tell you frankly, pup, for your own good.'
'Give me my hat,' said Jim. He passed the gate,
And as he tottered off he called, 'You wait.'

'Thanks, I don't have to,' Shepherd Ern replied;

'You'll do whatever waiting's being done.'
The door closed gently as he went inside,
The bolts jarred in the channels one by one.
'I'll give you throwing bats about, my son.
Anna.' 'My dear?' 'Where are you?' 'Come and find.'
The light went out, the windows stared out blind.

Blind as blind eyes forever seeing dark.
And in the dim the lovers went upstairs,
Her eyes fast closed, the shepherd's burning stark,
His lips entangled in her straying hairs,
Breath coming short as in a convert's prayers,
Her stealthy face all drowsy in the dim
And full of shudders as she yearned to him.

Jim crossed the water, cursing in his tears,
'By cripes, you wait. My God, he's with her now
And all her hair pulled down over her ears;
Loving the blaggard like a filthy sow,
I saw her kiss him from the apple bough.
They say a whore is always full of wiles,
O God, how sweet her eyes are when she smiles.

Curse her and curse her. No, my God, she's sweet,
It's all a helly nightmare. I shall wake.
If it were all a dream I'd kiss her feet,
I wish it were a dream for Jesus' sake.
One thing: I bet I made his guzzle ache,
I cop it fair before he sent me down,
I'll cop him yet some evening on the crown.

O God, O God, what pretty ways she had,
He's kissing all her skin, so white and soft.
She's kissing back. I think I'm going mad.
Like rutting rattens in the apple loft.
She held that light she carried high aloft
Full in my eyes for him to hit me by,
I had the light all dazzling in my eye.

She had her dress all clutched up to her shoulder,

And all her naked arm was all one gleam.
It's going to freeze to-night, it's turning colder,
I wish there was more water in the stream,
I'd drownd myself. Perhaps it's all a dream,
And bye and bye I'll wake and find it stuff;
By crimes, the pain I suffer's real enough.'

About two hundred yards from Gunder Loss
He stopped to shudder, leaning on the gate,
He bit the touchwood underneath the moss;
'Rotten, like her,' he muttered in his hate;
He spat it out again with 'But, you wait,
We'll see again, before to-morrow's past,
In this life he laughs longest who laughs last.'

All through the night the stream ran to the sea,
The different water always saying the same,
Cat-like, and then a tinkle, never glee,
A lonely little child alone in shame.
An otter snapped a thorn twig when he came,
It drifted down, it passed the Hazel Mill,
It passed the Springs; but Jimmy stayed there still.

Over the pointed hill-top came the light
Out of the mists on Ercall came the sun,
Red like a huntsman halloing after night,
Blowing a horn to rouse up everyone;
Through many glittering cities he had run,
Splashing the wind vanes on the dewy roofs
With golden sparks struck by his horses' hoofs.

The watchman rose, rubbing his rusty eyes,
He stirred the pot of cocoa for his mate;
The fireman watched his head of power rise.
'What time?' he asked. 'You haven't long to wait.'
'Now, is it time?' 'Yes. Let her ripple.' Straight
The whistle shrieked its message, 'Up to work!
Up, or be fined a quarter if you shirk.'

Hearing the whistle, Jimmy raised his head,

'The warning call, and me in Sunday clo'es;
I'd better go; I've time. The sun looks red,
I feel so stiff' I'm very nearly froze.'
So over brook and through the fields he goes,
And up the line among the navvies' smiles,
'Young Jimmy Gurney's been upon the tiles.'

The second whistle blew and work began,
Jimmy worked too, not knowing what he did,
He tripped and stumbled like a drunken man;
He muddled all, whatever he was bid,
The foreman cursed, 'Good God, what ails the kid?
Hi! Gurney. You. We'll have you crocking soon,
You take a lie down till the afternoon.'

'I won't,' he answered. 'Why the devil should I?
I'm here, I mean to work. I do my piece,
Or would do if a man could, but how could I
Then you come nagging round and never cease?
Well, take the job and give me my release,
I want the sack, now give it, there's my pick;
Give me the sack.' The sack was given quick.

V

Dully he got his time-check from the keeper.
'Curse her,' he said; 'and that's the end of whores'--
He stumbled drunkenly across a sleeper--
'Give all you have and get kicked out a-doors.'
He cashed his time-check at the station stores.
'Bett'ring yourself, I hope, Jim,' said the master;
'That's it,' said Jim; 'and so I will do, blast her.'

Beyond the bridge, a sharp turn to the right
Leads to 'The Bull and Boar,' the carters' rest;

xliv

An inn so hidden it is out of sight
To anyone not coming from the west.
The high embankment hides it with its crest.
Far up above the Chester trains go by,
The drinkers see them sweep against the sky.

Canal men used it when the barges came,
The navvies used it when the line was making;
The pigeons strut and sidle, ruffling, tame,
The chuckling brook in front sets shadows shaking.
Cider and beer for thirsty workers' slaking,
A quiet house; like all that God controls,
It is Fate's instrument on human souls.

Thither Jim turned. 'And now I'll drink,' he said.
'I'll drink and drink--I never did before--
I'll drink and drink until I'm mad or dead,
For that's what comes of meddling with a whore.'
He called for liquor at 'The Bull and Boar';
Moody he drank; the woman asked him why:
'Have you had trouble?' 'No,' he said, 'I'm dry.

Dry and burnt up, so give's another drink;
That's better, that's much better, that's the sort.'
And then he sang, so that he should not think,
His Binger-Bopper song, but cut it short.
His wits were working like a brewer's wort
Until among them came the vision gleaming
Of Ern with bloody nose and Anna screaming.

'That's what I'll do,' he muttered; 'knock him out,
And kick his face in with a running jump.
I'll not have dazzled eyes this second bout,
And she can wash the fragments under pump.'
It was his ace; but Death had played a trump.
Death the blind beggar chuckled, nodding dumb,
'My game; the shroud is ready, Jimmy--come.'

Meanwhile, the mother, waiting for her child,
Had tottered out a dozen times to search.

'Jimmy,' she said, 'you'll drive your mother wild;
Your father's name's too good a name to smirch,
Come home, my dear, she'll leave you in the lurch;
He was so good, my little Jim, so clever;
He never stop a night away, not ever.

He never slept a night away till now,
Never, not once, in all the time he's been.
It's the Lord's will, they say, and we must bow,
But O it's like a knife, it cuts so keen!
He'll work in's Sunday clothes, it'll be seen,
And then they'll laugh, and say "It isn't strange;
He slept with her, and so he couldn't change."

Perhaps,' she thought, 'I'm wrong; perhaps he's dead;
Killed himself like; folk do in love, they say.
He never tells what passes in his head,
And he's been looking late so old and grey.
A railway train has cut his head away,
Like the poor hare we found at Maylow's shack.
O God have pity, bring my darling back!'

All the high stars went sweeping through the sky,
The sun made all the orient clean, clear gold,
'O blessed God,' she prayed, 'do let me die,
Or bring my wand'ring lamb back into fold.
The whistle's gone, and all the bacon's cold;
I must know somehow if he's on the line,
He could have bacon sandwich when he dine.'

She cut the bread, and started, short of breath,
Up the canal now draining for the rail;
A poor old woman pitted against death,
Bringing her pennyworth of love for bail.
Wisdom, beauty, and love may not avail.
She was too late. 'Yes, he was here; oh, yes.
He chucked his job and went.' 'Where?' 'Home, I guess.'

'Home, but he hasn't been home.' 'Well, he went.
Perhaps you missed him, mother.' 'Or perhaps

He took the field path yonder through the bent.
He very likely done that, don't he, chaps?'
The speaker tested both his trouser straps
And took his pick. 'He's in the town,' he said.
'He'll be all right, after a bit in bed.'

She trembled down the high embankment's ridge
Glad, though too late; not yet too late, indeed.
For forty yards away, beyond the bridge,
Jimmy still drank, the devil still sowed seed.
'A bit in bed,' she thought, 'is what I need.
I'll go to "Bull and Boar" and rest a bit,
They've got a bench outside they'd let me sit.'

Even as two soldiers on a fortress wall
See the bright fire streak of a coming shell.
Catch breath, and wonder 'Which way will it fall?
To you? to me? or will it all be well?'
Ev'n so stood life and death, and could not tell
Whether she'd go to th'inn and find her son,
Or take the field and let the doom be done.

'No, not the inn,' she thought. 'People would talk.
I couldn't in the open daytime; no.
I'll just sit here upon the timber balk,
I'll rest for just a minute and then go.'
Resting, her old tired heart began to glow,
Glowed and gave thanks, and thought itself in clover,
'He's lost his job, so now she'll throw him over.'

Sitting, she saw the rustling thistle-kex,
The picks flash bright above, the trollies tip.
The bridge-stone shining, full of silver specks,
And three swift children running down the dip.
A Stoke Saint Michael carter cracked his whip,
The water in the runway made its din.
She half heard singing coming from the inn.

She turned, and left the inn, and took the path
And 'Brother Life, you lose,' said Brother Death,

'Even as the Lord of all appointed hath
In this great miracle of blood and breath.'
He doeth all things well as the book saith,
He bids the changing stars fulfil their turn,
His hand is on us when we least discern.

Slowly she tottered, stopping with the stitch,
Catching her breath, 'O lawks, a dear, a dear.
How the poor tubings in my heart do twitch,
It hurts like the rheumatics very near.'
And every painful footstep drew her clear
From that young life she bore with so much pain.
She never had him to herself again.

Out of the inn came Jimmy, red with drink,
Crying: 'I'll show her. Wait a bit. I'll show her.
You wait a bit. I'm not the kid you think.
I'm Jimmy Gurney, champion tupper-thrower,
When I get done with her you'll never know her,
Nor him you won't. Out of my way, you fowls,
Or else I'll rip the red things off your jowls.'

He went across the fields to Plaister's End.
There was a lot of water in the brook,
Sun and white cloud and weather on the mend
For any man with any eyes to look.
He found old Callow's plough-bat, which he took,
'My innings now, my pretty dear,' said he.
'You wait a bit. I'll show you. Now you'll see.'

Her chimney smoke was blowing blue and faint,
The wise duck shook a tail across the pool,
The blacksmith's shanty smelt of burning paint,
Four newly-tired cartwheels hung to cool.
He had loved the place when under Anna's rule.
Now he clenched teeth and flung aside the gate,
There at the door they stood. He grinned. 'Now wait.'

Ern had just brought her in a wired hare,
She stood beside him stroking down the fur.

'Oh, Ern, poor thing, look how its eyes do stare,'
'It isn't it,' he answered. 'It's a her.'
She stroked the breast and plucked away a bur,
She kissed the pads, and leapt back with a shout,
'My God, he's got the spudder. Ern. Look out.'

Ern clenched his fists. Too late. He felt no pain,
Only incredible haste in something swift,
A shock that made the sky black on his brain,
Then stillness, while a little cloud went drift.
The weight upon his thigh bones wouldn't lift;
Then poultry in a long procession came,
Grey-legged, doing the goose-step, eyes like flame.

Grey-legged old cocks and hens sedate in age,
Marching with jerks as though they moved on springs,
With sidelong hate in round eyes red with rage,
And shouldered muskets clipped by jealous wings,
Then an array of horns and stupid things:
Sheep on a hill with harebells, hare for dinner.
'Hare.' A slow darkness covered up the sinner.

'But little time is right hand fain of blow.'
Only a second changes life to death;
Hate ends before the pulses cease to go,
There is great power in the stop of breath.
There's too great truth in what the dumb thing saith,
Hate never goes so far as that, nor can.
'I am what life becomes. D'you hate me, man?'

Hate with his babbling instant, red and damning,
Passed with his instant, having drunken red.
'You've killed him.'
'No, I've not, he's only shamming.
Get up.' 'He can't.' 'O God, he isn't dead.'
'O God.' 'Here. Get a basin. Bathe his head.
Ernie, for God's sake, what are you playing at?
I only give him one like, with the bat.'

Man cannot call the brimming instant back;

Time's an affair of instants spun to days;
If man must make an instant gold, or black,
Let him, he may, but Time must go his ways.
Life may be duller for an instant's blaze.
Life's an affair of instants spun to years,
Instants are only cause of all these tears.

Then Anna screamed aloud. 'Help. Murder. Murder.'
'By God, it is,' he said. 'Through you, you slut.'
Backing, she screamed, until the blacksmith heard her.
'Hurry,' they cried, 'the woman's throat's being cut.'
Jim had his coat off by the water butt.
'He might come to,' he said, 'with wine or soup.
I only hit him once, like, with the scoop.

Splash water on him, chaps. I only meant
To hit him just a clip, like, nothing more.
There. Look. He isn't dead, his eyelids went.
And he went down. O God, his head's all tore.
I've washed and washed: it's all one gob of gore.
He don't look dead to you? What? Nor to you?
Not kill, the clip I give him, couldn't do.'

'God send; he looks damn bad,' the blacksmith said.
'Py Cot,' his mate said, 'she wass altogether;
She hass an illness look of peing ted.'
'Here. Get a glass,' the smith said, 'and a feather.'
'Wass you at fightings or at playings whether?'
'Here, get a glass and feather. Quick's the word.'
The glass was clear. The feather never stirred.

'By God, I'm sorry, Jim. That settles it.'
'By God. I've killed him then.' 'The doctor might.'
'Try, if you like; but that's a nasty hit.'
'Doctor's gone by. He won't be back till night.'
'Py Cot, the feather was not looking right.'
'By Jesus, chaps, I never meant to kill 'un.
Only to bat. I'll go to p'leece and tell 'un.

O Ern, for God's sake speak, for God's sake speak.'

No answer followed: Ern had done with dust,
'The p'leece is best,' the smith said, 'or a beak.
I'll come along; and so the lady must.
Evans, you bring the lady, will you just?
Tell 'em just how it come, lad. Come your ways;
And Joe, you watch the body where it lays.'

They walked to town, Jim on the blacksmith's arm.
Jimmy was crying like a child, and saying,
'I never meant to do him any harm.'
His teeth went clack, like bones at murmurs playing,
And then he trembled hard and broke out praying,
'God help my poor old mother. If he's dead,
I've brought her my last wages home,' he said.

He trod his last free journey down the street;
Treading the middle road, and seeing both sides,
The school, the inns, the butchers selling meat,
The busy market where the town divides.
Then past the tanpits full of stinking hides,
And up the lane to death, as weak as pith.
'By God, I hate this, Jimmy,' said the smith.

VI

Anna in black, the judge in scarlet robes,
A fuss of lawyers' people coming, going,
The windows shut, the gas alight in globes,
Evening outside, and pleasant weather blowing.
'They'll hang him?' 'I suppose so; there's no knowing.'
'A pretty piece, the woman, ain't she, John?
He killed the fellow just for carrying on.'

'She give her piece to counsel pretty clear.'
'Ah, that she did, and when she stop she smiled.'

'She's had a-many men, that pretty dear;
She's drove a-many pretty fellows wild.'
'More silly idiots they to be beguiled.'
'Well, I don't know.' 'Well, I do. See her eyes?
Mystery, eh? A woman's mystery's lies.'

'Perhaps.' 'No p'raps about it, that's the truth.
I know these women; they're a rotten lot.'
'You didn't use to think so in your youth.'
'No; but I'm wiser now, and not so hot.
Married or buried, *I* say, wives or shot,
These unmanned, unattached Maries and Susans
Make life no better than a proper nuisance.'

'Well, I don't know.' 'Well, if you don't you will.'
'I look on women as as good as men.'
'Now, that's the kind of talk that makes me ill.
When have they been as good? I ask you when?'
'Always they have.' 'They haven't. Now and then
P'raps one or two was neither hen nor fury.'
'One for your mother, that. Here comes the jury.'

Guilty. Thumbs down. No hope. The judge passed sentence;
'A frantic passionate youth, unfit for life,
A fitting time afforded for repentance,
Then certain justice with a pitiless knife.
For her his wretched victim's widowed wife,
Pity. For her who bore him, pity. (Cheers.)
The jury were exempt for seven years.'

All bowed; the Judge passed to the robing-room,
Dismissed his clerks, disrobed, and knelt and prayed
As was his custom after passing doom,
Doom upon life, upon the thing not made.
'O God, who made us out of dust, and laid
Thee in us bright, to lead us to the truth,
O God, have pity upon this poor youth.

Show him Thy grace, O God, before he die;
Shine in his heart; have mercy upon me,

Who deal the laws men make to travel by
Under the sun upon the path to Thee;
O God Thou knowest I'm as blind as he,
As blind, as frantic, not so single, worse,
Only Thy pity spared me from the curse.

Thy pity, and Thy mercy, God, did save,
Thy bounteous gifts, not any grace of mine,
From all the pitfalls leading to the grave,
From all the death-feasts with the husks and swine.
God, who hast given me all things, now make shine
Bright in this sinner's heart that he may see.
God, take this poor boy's spirit back to Thee.'

Then trembling with his hands, for he was old,
He went to meet his college friend, the Dean,
The loiterers watched him as his carriage rolled.
'There goes the Judge,' said one, and one was keen:
'Hanging that wretched boy, that's where he's been.'
A policeman spat, two lawyers talked statistics,
'"Crime passionel" in Agricultural Districts.'

'They'd oughtn't hang a boy': but one said 'Stuff.
This sentimental talk is rotten, rotten.
The law's the law and not half strict enough,
Forgers and murderers are misbegotten,
Let them be hanged and let them be forgotten.
A rotten fool should have a rotten end;
Mend them, you say? The rotten never mend.'

And one 'Not mend? The rotten not, perhaps.
The rotting would; so would the just infected.
A week in quod has ruined lots of chaps
Who'd all got good in them till prison wrecked it.'
And one, 'Society must be protected.'
'He's just a kid. She trapped him.' 'No, she didden.'
'He'll be reprieved.' 'He mid be and he midden.'

So the talk went; and Anna took the train,
Too sad for tears, and pale; a lady spoke

Asking if she were ill or suffering pain?
'Neither,' she said; but sorrow made her choke,
'I'm only sick because my heart is broke.
My friend, a man, my oldest friend here, died.
I had to see the man who killed him, tried.

He's to be hanged. Only a boy. My friend.
I thought him just a boy; I didn't know.
And Ern was killed, and now the boy's to end,
And all because he thought he loved me so.'
'My dear,' the lady said; and Anna, 'Oh.
It's very hard to bear the ills men make,
He thought he loved, and it was all mistake.'

'My dear,' the lady said; 'you poor, poor woman,
Have you no friends to go to?' 'I'm alone.
I've parents living, but they're both inhuman,
And none can cure what pierces to the bone.
I'll have to leave and go where I'm not known.
Begin my life again.' Her friend said 'Yes.
Certainly that. But leave me your address:
For I might hear of something; I'll enquire,
Perhaps the boy might be reprieved or pardoned.
Couldn't we ask the rector or the squire
To write and ask the Judge? He can't be hardened.
What do you do? Is it housework? Have you gardened?
Your hands are very white and soft to touch.'
'Lately I've not had heart for doing much.'

So the talk passes as the train descends
Into the vale and halts and starts to climb
To where the apple-bearing country ends
And pleasant-pastured hills rise sweet with thyme,
Where clinking sheepbells make a broken chime
And sunwarm gorses rich the air with scent
And kestrels poise for mice, there Anna went.

There, in the April, in the garden-close,
One heard her in the morning singing sweet,
Calling the birds from the unbudded rose,

Offering her lips with grains for them to eat.
The redbreasts come with little wiry feet,
Sparrows and tits and all wild feathery things,
Brushing her lifted face with quivering wings.

Jimmy was taken down into a cell,
He did not need a hand, he made no fuss.
The men were kind 'for what the kid done ... well
The same might come to any one of us.'
They brought him bits of cake at tea time: thus
The love that fashioned all in human ken,
Works in the marvellous hearts of simple men.

And in the nights (they watched him night and day)
They told him bits of stories through the grating,
Of how the game went at the football play,
And how the rooks outside had started mating.
And all the time they knew the rope was waiting,
And every evening friend would say to friend,
'I hope we've not to drag him at the end.'

And poor old mother came to see her son,
'The Lord has gave,' she said, 'The Lord has took;
I loved you very dear, my darling one,
And now there's none but God where we can look.
We've got God's promise written in His Book,
He will not fail; but oh, it do seem hard.'
She hired a room outside the prison yard.

'Where did you get the money for the room?
And how are you living, mother; how'll you live?'
'It's what I'd saved to put me in the tomb,
I'll want no tomb but what the parish give.'
'Mother, I lied to you that time, O forgive,
I brought home half my wages, half I spent,
And you went short that week to pay the rent.

I went to see'r, I spent my money on her,
And you who bore me paid the cost in pain.
You went without to buy the clothes upon her:

A hat, a locket, and a silver chain.
O mother dear, if all might be again,
Only from last October, you and me;
O mother dear, how different it would be.

We were so happy in the room together,
Singing at "Binger-Bopper," weren't us, just?
And going a-hopping in the summer weather,
And all the hedges covered white with dust,
And blackberries, and that, and traveller's trust.
I thought her wronged, and true, and sweet, and wise,
The devil takes sweet shapes when he tells lies.

Mother, my dear, will you forgive your son?'
'God knows I do, Jim, I forgive you, dear;
You didn't know, and couldn't, what you done.
God pity all poor people suffering here,
And may His mercy shine upon us clear,
And may we have His Holy Word for mark,
To lead us to His Kingdom through the dark.'

'Amen.' 'Amen,' said Jimmy; then they kissed.
The warders watched, the little larks were singing,
A plough team jangled, turning at the rist;
Beyond, the mild cathedral bells were ringing,
The elm-tree rooks were cawing at the springing:
O beauty of the time when winter's done,
And all the fields are laughing at the sun!

'I s'pose they've brought the line beyond the Knapp?'
'Ah, and beyond the Barcle, so they say.'
'Hearing the rooks begin reminds a chap.
Look queer, the street will, with the lock away;
O God, I'll never see it.' 'Let us pray.
Don't think of that, but think,' the mother said,
'Of men going on long after we are dead.

Red helpless little things will come to birth,
And hear the whistles going down the line,
And grow up strong and go about the earth,

And have much happier times than yours and mine;
And some day one of them will get a sign,
And talk to folk, and put an end to sin,
And then God's blessed kingdom will begin.

God dropped a spark down into everyone,
And if we find and fan it to a blaze
It'll spring up and glow like--like the sun,
And light the wandering out of stony ways.
God warms His hands at man's heart when he prays,
And light of prayer is spreading heart to heart;
It'll light all where now it lights a part.

And God who gave His mercies takes His mercies,
And God who gives beginning gives the end.
I dread my death; but it's the end of curses,
A rest for broken things too broke to mend.
O Captain Christ, our blessed Lord and Friend,
We are two wandered sinners in the mire,
Burn our dead hearts with love out of Thy fire.

And when thy death comes, Master, let us bear it
As of Thy will, however hard to go;
Thy Cross is infinite for us to share it,
Thy help is infinite for us to know.
And when the long trumpets of the Judgment blow
May our poor souls be glad and meet agen,
And rest in Thee.' 'Say, "Amen," Jim.' 'Amen.'

* * * * *

There was a group outside the prison gate,
Waiting to hear them ring the passing bell,
Waiting as empty people always wait
For the strong toxic of another's hell.
And mother stood there, too, not seeing well,
Praying through tears to let His will be done,
And not to hide His mercy from her son.

Talk in the little group was passing quick.

'It's nothing now to what it was, to watch.'
'Poor wretched kid, I bet he's feeling sick.'
'Eh? What d'you say, chaps? Someone got a match?'
'They draw a bolt and drop you down a hatch
And break your neck, whereas they used to strangle
In olden times, when you could see them dangle.'

Some one said, 'Off hats' when the bell began.
Mother was whimpering now upon her knees.
A broken ringing like a beaten pan
It sent the sparrows wavering to the trees.
The wall-top grasses whickered in the breeze,
The broken ringing clanged, clattered and clanged
As though men's bees were swarming, not men hanged.

Now certain Justice with the pitiless knife.
The white sick chaplain snuffling at the nose.
'I am the resurrection and the life.'
The bell still clangs, the small procession goes,
The prison warders ready ranged in rows.
'Now, Gurney, come, my dear; it's time,' they said.
And ninety seconds later he was dead.

Some of life's sad ones are too strong to die,
Grief doesn't kill them as it kills the weak,
Sorrow is not for those who sit and cry
Lapped in the love of turning t'other cheek,
But for the noble souls austere and bleak
Who have had the bitter dose and drained the cup
And wait for Death face fronted, standing up.

As the last man upon the sinking ship,
Seeing the brine creep brightly on the deck,
Hearing aloft the slatting topsails rip,
Ripping to rags among the topmast's wreck,
Yet hoists the new red ensign without speck,
That she, so fair, may sink with colours flying,
So the old widowed mother kept from dying.

She tottered home, back to the little room,

It was all over for her, but for life;
She drew the blinds, and trembled in the gloom;
'I sat here thus when I was wedded wife;
Sorrow sometimes, and joy; but always strife.
Struggle to live except just at the last,
O God, I thank Thee for the mercies past.

Harry, my man, when we were courting; eh…
The April morning up the Cony-gree.
How grand he looked upon our wedding day.
"I wish we'd had the bells," he said to me;
And we'd the moon that evening, I and he,
And dew come wet, oh, I remember how,
And we come home to where I'm sitting now.

And he lay dead here, and his son was born here;
He never saw his son, his little Jim.
And now I'm all alone here, left to mourn here,
And there are all his clothes, but never him.
He's down under the prison in the dim,
With quicklime working on him to the bone,
The flesh I made with many and many a groan.

Oh, how his little face come, with bright hair,
Dear little face. We made this room so snug;
He sit beside me in his little chair,
I give him real tea sometimes in his mug.
He liked the velvet in the patchwork rug.
He used to stroke it, did my pretty son,
He called it Bunny, little Jimmie done.

And then he ran so, he was strong at running,
Always a strong one, like his dad at that.
In summertimes I done my sewing sunning,
And he'd be sprawling, playing with the cat.
And neighbours brought their knitting out to chat
Till five o'clock; he had his tea at five;
How sweet life was when Jimmy was alive.'

* * * * *

Darkness and midnight, and the midnight chimes.
Another four-and-twenty hours begin,
Darkness again, and many, many times,
The alternating light and darkness spin
Until the face so thin is still more thin,
Gazing each earthly evening wet or fine
For Jimmy coming from work along the line.

Over her head the Chester wires hum,
Under the bridge the rocking engines flash.
'He's very late this evening, but he'll come
And bring his little packet full of cash
(Always he does) and supper's cracker hash,
That is his favourite food excepting bacon.
They say my boy was hanged; but they're mistaken.

And sometimes she will walk the cindery mile,
Singing, as she and Jimmy used to do,
Singing 'The parson's dog lep over a stile,'
Along the path where water lilies grow.
The stars are placid on the evening's blue,
Burning like eyes so calm, so unafraid,
On all that God has given and man has made.

Burning they watch, and mothlike owls come out,
The redbreast warbles shrilly once and stops;
The homing cowman gives his dog a shout,
The lamps are lighted in the village shops.
Silence; the last bird passes; in the copse
The hazels cross the moon, a nightjar spins,
Dew wets the grass, the nightingale begins.

Singing her crazy song the mother goes,
Singing as though her heart were full of peace,
Moths knock the petals from the dropping rose,
Stars make the glimmering pool a golden fleece,
The moon droops west, but still she does not cease,
The little mice peep out to hear her sing,
Until the inn-man's cockerel shakes his wing.

And in the sunny dawns of hot Julys,
The labourers going to meadow see her there.
Rubbing the sleep out of their heavy eyes,
They lean upon the parapet to stare;
They see her plaiting basil in her hair,
Basil, the dark red wound-wort, cops of clover,
The blue self-heal and golden Jacks of Dover.

Dully they watch her, then they turn to go
To that high Shropshire upland of late hay;
Her singing lingers with them as they mow,
And many times they try it, now grave, now gay,
Till, with full throat, over the hills away,
They lift it clear; oh, very clear it towers
Mixed with the swish of many falling flowers.

'The Widow in the Bye Street' first appeared in *The English Review* for February 1912. I thank the editor and proprietors of the *Review* for permitting me to reprint it here.

The persons and events described in the poem are entirely imaginary, and no reference is made or intended to any living person.
JOHN MASEFIELD.
10*th May* 1912.

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